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# The Decline of the Ottoman Empire

Set of 4 Articles

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The Decline of the Ottoman Empire

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## PART1:

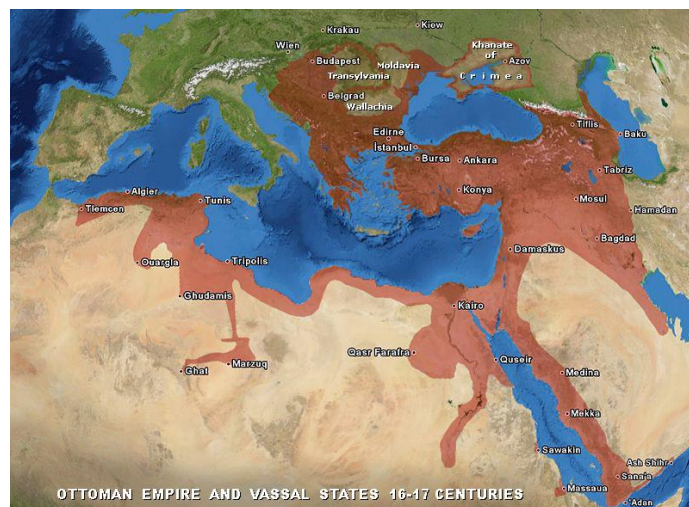
### The Decline of the Ottoman Empire: Politics and Economics

Oct. 14

Throughout Islamic history, empires rose and fell for 1400 years. The Umayyads, Abbasids, Mamluks, Mughals, and Ottomans are just some of the major dynasties of Islam that rose to prominence, achieved a golden age, and eventually fell and were only remembered in the history books. Ibn Khaldun, in his brilliant book on historiography, *The Muqaddimah*, states that “dynasties have a natural life span like individuals” and that “it [a dynasty] grows up and passes into an age of stagnation and then into retrogression.” The insightful words of Ibn Khaldun in 1337 hold true for the history of the last great Muslim empire – the Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman Empire began as a small state of Turkish sultans in Anatolia (present-day Turkey) in 1300. By 1453, they were a force to be reckoned with, controlling land in Europe and Asia, with a capital at Istanbul. By the mid-1500s, the empire had reached its zenith under Sultan Süleyman. At that time, it was by far the most powerful and largest empire in Europe, and also controlled North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and parts of Persia. However, as Ibn Khaldun stated, this dynasty would eventually go into a time of stagnation, and finally decline. This post will analyze two factors that helped bring about the decline of the Ottomans from the 1500s through the 1800s – a weak and ineffective government and economic stagnation.

#### Government



At its height in the mid-1500s, the Ottoman Empire controlled North Africa, Southeast Europe, and the Arabian Peninsula

From the birth of the Ottoman state under Osman Gazi through its period of unrivaled power in the mid-1500s, the center of the Ottoman Empire was always the sultan. The Ottoman Empire was a dynastic one, so when a sultan died, his son would become the new sultan. These early sultans all took great pride in their jobs and had a central role in the direction of the empire. Sultans oversaw governmental meetings, hired and fired officials, and personally led military campaigns to the edges of the empire.

However, there was one aspect of the sultanate that was never fully formalized – succession. The early years of the Ottoman Empire were beset by numerous civil wars, as sons would fight each other for power after their father had died. Usually it was not much of a problem, as the sultans would make it clear which of their sons they preferred. At other times, however, wars within the empire lasted for years and were horribly destructive to the power of the empire.

Seeking to solve this problem, Sultan Ahmed I (reigned 1603-1617) instituted a new system for choosing sultans. Instead of a sultan's sons being governors within the empire until their father died, they would stay at the palace in Istanbul until their time came. In most cases, they actually were not even allowed to leave the palace. This essentially made them prisoners until they became sultans.



Sultan Ahmed I began a new system for picking sultans in the 1600s

While the intentions of Ahmed I were probably righteous, the effects of his policy were disastrous. Instead of sultans coming to the throne with experience in governance and policy, they were usually ignorant of anything but the pleasures of palace life. They were completely incompetent as rulers of a powerful empire. The 300 year old tradition of sultans being the powerful, resourceful, and able leaders of the Ottoman State was over. To give some context, the Ottoman sultans saw their job primarily as the commander-in-chief of the army. All Ottoman sultans led their armies into battle and saw that as a central aspect to their job. However, Sultan Murad IV was the last Ottoman sultan to lead his army into battle in 1638.

Despite their inexperience and incompetence, Ottoman sultans were still officially in charge of the empire. Thus, without education and knowledge of how to run an empire, they still had the power to direct the government. The result of this was a long period of complete administrative instability. Viziers (ministers) were appointed and fired at the whim of the sultan, leading to great difficulty in policies ever being put into place. Also, since experience and talent were no longer seen as necessary by the Ottoman sultan himself, those hoping to advance in civil service were

not promoted based on skill. Instead, bribery and favoritism wreaked havoc on the Ottoman government.

With the rise of incompetent officials in the central Ottoman government, a process of decentralization began. Local governments gained more autonomy and showed less respect for the government in Istanbul. On a practical level, this meant less tax revenue sent to the central government, which meant a weaker government and military in general. All this occurring during the rise of the empires of Europe such as England, France, Russia, and Austria.

## Economic

Going hand-in-hand with the political decline of the empire was its economic decline. Traditionally, one of the major sources of income of the Ottoman Empire was booty gained in war. As the empire reached its maximum size in the mid-1500s, that source of income dried up. Because of the empire's large size, foreign nations were further and further away from the capital, making campaigns against those nations very expensive. So expensive, in fact, that it didn't make economic sense to keep expanding.

Another economic aspect that affected the empire starting in the 1600s was inflation. In the 1500s and 1600s, Western European nations like Spain, England, and France were exploring and conquering the New World across the Atlantic. Their conquests brought them huge quantities of gold and particularly silver, particularly to the Spanish from Mexico. The Ottoman economy was based on silver. Coins were minted in silver, taxes collected in silver, and silver to government officials paid in silver. The huge influx of silver coming from America drastically devalued the Ottoman currency according to the economic laws of supply and demand.

These statistics show how bad inflation was in the 1500s and 1600s in the Ottoman Empire. In 1580, 1 gold coin could be bought for 60 silver ones. 10 years later, in 1590, it would take 120 silver coins to buy one gold. And in 1640, it took 250 silver coins in order to buy one gold one. This inflation caused prices across the empire to rise, hurting average citizens and the empire as a whole.

As this process of economic stagnation and decline continued throughout the 1600s and 1700s, the central government had to look for new sources of income. At the same time, European nations were gaining the upper hand over the Ottomans militarily, politically, and economically. As a result, a new policy of economic capitulations and concessions began. Capitulations were agreements between the Ottoman government and certain European governments (usually the French), giving the Europeans control over an entire industry within the Ottoman Empire in exchange for a one-time payment and/or diplomatic support. Because of the relative weakness of the Ottoman Empire compared to European nations, the Ottoman government had to enter into these agreements.

The negative side effects of these agreements were devastating. For example, in 1740, the Ottoman Empire entered into an agreement with France that gave French citizens the right to travel and trade in any part of the Ottoman Empire. With cheaper and better goods, they were

able to start to push out local Ottoman merchants, hurting the economy in general. In addition to economic concessions, the capitulations also meant a loss of sovereignty for the Ottoman government. In that same agreement, the French were given full jurisdiction over their own citizens and all Roman Catholics in the Ottoman Empire. In effect, what this meant is that the Ottoman government had no authority to enforce laws on any of those people, even if they are within the empire's borders.

The capitulations of the 1700s and 1800s were one of the biggest reasons for the decline of the Ottoman Empire during this time. This series of humiliating contracts put the empire in a position of subservience to European nations, which referred to it as the "Sick Man of Europe".

## The Decline of the Ottoman Empire: Islamic Decline

Oct. 20

In previous section *The Decline of the Ottoman Empire* we analyzed the political and economic aspects of this great empire's decline. In history, nothing happens for only one reason. The decline of the Ottomans was the result of a great many factors. Among the most important reasons are the social and religious changes in the Ottoman realm. This post will analyze the Islamic changes in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire in the 1800s and how they helped bring the downfall of the empire in 1922.

### Religious Changes – The Tanzimat

From the very beginning of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1300s, Islam had been the basis of the state. The Ottomans built on the Islamic government traditions of the Seljuk Empire of the Middle Ages which prided itself on being the defender of Islam in its time. The Ottomans saw themselves in the same light. As the empire grew and expanded through the centuries, the Ottomans formalized their position as the defenders of Islam, with the sultans taking on the title of khalifah (caliph) of the Muslim world. The law of the land was the Shariah, the religious laws of Islam passed down through Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) in the deserts of Arabia in the 600s.

In the late Ottoman Empire, however, things began to change. With the political and economic rise of Europe in the face of Ottoman decline that was discussed in part 1, questions began to be asked about the direction of the Ottoman Empire. Many people within the government of the empire began to think that in order to become more powerful like the Europeans, the Ottoman Empire needs to become more like European nations.

These beliefs reached the level of the Ottoman sultan in the early 1800s. Soon, reforms meant to make the Ottoman Empire more European touched all aspects of Ottoman life. In 1826, sultan Mahmud II (reigned 1808-1839) instituted a clothing reform for all government officials. Instead of the traditional robes and turbans that sultans and government workers wore, they now dressed in European-style military clothes. Looking like the Europeans was not the only reform, however. Mahmud also abolished the ancient Janissaries, military troops that came from all parts of the empire. Instead, he began a new corps called the Nizam-ı cedid, which was recruited only from the empire's Turkish citizens.

Mahmud II's reforms only began the drastic changes that the Ottoman Empire would undergo in the turbulent 19th century. The changes would culminate in the Tanzimat reforms under sultans Abdülmecid in 1839 and 1856. "Tanzimat" means reorganization in Ottoman Turkish and that is exactly what these changes were: a complete reorganization of the Ottoman government. The Tanzimat were a series of laws that was meant to modernize the Ottoman Empire along European lines. The old system of a Shariah-based government was gone. Islamic laws and norms were gone from the government. The fair and equitable Islamic social structure of the empire was gone.





Sultan Abdulmecid I, who instituted the Tanzimat reforms

Keeping in mind the political and economic problems the empire faced from part 1 of this article, the Ottoman Empire certainly did need to reform. It was declining fast in power in comparison to Western European nations. However, the path the Ottomans took was to erase Islam from the political structure of the Ottoman state. During this time, Europe had mostly gotten rid of religious influence in politics. The French Revolution in the early 1800s separated church and state and created a secular society. The power of the Anglican Church in English politics was nowhere near its former power. The pope in Rome was merely but a figurehead. The overarching idea in Europe at that time was that **if you get rid of religion in general, you will become more successful**. The Ottomans copied this same formula.

Some of the changes included: secular courts replaced Islamic judges, a finance system based on the French model, legalization of homosexuality, factories replaced artisans guilds, enforcement of an “Ottoman” identity instead of unique cultural identities, and the reform of the educational system to be based on a science/technology curriculum instead of traditional subjects such as Quran, Islamic studies, and poetry. While there were many other reforms that were necessary and did not change the role of Islam in the empire, many of the new laws were aimed at removing Islam from public life. The Ottomans brought in people known as “French knowers” from Europe to come and reform their society.





European influence was even seen in architecture. Dolmabaçe Palace, built by Sultan Abdülmecid was meant to look like European palaces of that time.

This attempt to remove Islam from public life left many within the empire feeling as if their traditions were being marginalized in favor of European norms that did not fit in the empire. The role of teachers, shaikhs, and Islamic judges was suddenly marginalized. Large segments of the population opposed the Tanzimat's efforts to redefine their lives. Islamic rebellions against the government began in places such as the deserts of Arabia (the First Saudi State), Bosnia, and Egypt. The Ottoman Empire had historically used Islam to unite the diverse peoples of its lands, but with the removal of Islam, that bonding agent was slowly breaking away the empire.

### **Sultan Abdülhamid II**

In the middle of all these changes and reforms regarding the role of Islam came a new sultan in 1876: Abdülhamid II. While he was in favor of the parts of the Tanzimat that did not contradict Islam and actually did benefit the empire, he was vehemently against the decline of the role of Islam in the empire. Since 1517, the Ottoman sultans were also the caliphs of the Muslim world, in essence the official leaders and protectors of Muslims worldwide. Most sultans had recently played down their roles as caliphs. Abdülhamid on the other hand emphasized the Islamic aspects of his job.



In the late 1800s, Sultan Abdülhamid II attempted to bring back the Islamic character of the Ottoman Empire.

During his reign, Abdülhamid built the Istanbul-Madinah railway which make travel to the Hajj for pilgrims much easier. During his reign, Istanbul was made a center of Islamic printing, producing thousands of copies of the Quran for distribution around the Muslim world. In 1889, he established a “House of Scholars” whose purpose was to promote the Islamic sciences across the empire. Perhaps his most daring and notable defense of Islam and Muslims occurred when the Zionist leader, Theodor Herzl offered Abdülhamid II **150 million pounds in gold in exchange for the land of Palestine**. Abdülhamid’s response was legendary:

□ *Even if you gave me as much gold as the entire world, let alone the 150 million English pounds in gold, I would not accept this at all. I have served the Islamic milla and the Ummah of Muhammad for more than thirty years, and never did I blacken the pages of the Muslims- my fathers and ancestors, the Ottoman sultans and caliphs. And so I will never accept what you ask of me.*

Despite Abdülhamid’s best efforts, the rising tide of European secularism was too great to resist. In 1909, the Young Turks, a liberal secular group, overthrew Abdülhamid and installed his brother Mehmed V on the throne. Mehmed was to have no real power as the control of the empire was in the hands of a group of three Young Turks called the “Three Pashas”. Abdülhamid II was the last Ottoman sultan to exercise any real power over the empire. Just 13 years later the empire would be destroyed in the aftermath of World War One, and the caliphate destroyed 2 years later in 1924.

## The Decline of the Ottoman Empire: Nationalism

Oct. 24

In first section under this series, we looked at what impact political and economic problems had on bringing down this long-lasting dynasty. In second section, a loss of Islamic character was analyzed in connection to the the overall decline and fall of the empire, despite the best efforts of Sultan Abdülhamid II. In this post, the far reaching effects of nationalism will be understood in relation to the ethnic and political groups within the Ottoman Empire.

### The Millet System

Before looking at how nationalism affected the Ottomans, we have to look further back, at how different nationalities originally were a source of strength for the Ottomans. After Sultan Mehmed II conquered Constantinople in 1453, he had a unique problem on his hands: how to deal with the sizable Christian minority within his realm. Islam has numerous rules about how to treat religious minorities and what kinds of rights they are accorded. Working within these rules, Sultan Mehmed established a system later known as the *millet system* (millet coming from the Arabic word *ملة* meaning “nation”).



Sultan Mehmed II established the millet system, giving religious freedom to minorities in the Ottoman Empire

According to the millet system, Christians within the Ottoman Empire were allowed to live much like they did before Ottoman rule. They were allowed to chose their own religious leaders, collect their own taxes, use their own language, and even to have their own courts where Christians were tried according to Christian laws, not Muslim ones. This type of a system was revolutionary at that time in Europe, where in Christian-dominated areas, there was no concept of religious freedom or minority rights.

Over time, the millet system would grow to include more than just one group of Christians. To accomodate all the different forms of Christianity within the Ottoman realm, each church was given its own millet, and allowed to run by its own rules. Jews were also allowed to have their own millet. During the reign of Mehmed II's son, Bayezid II, thousands of Jews who were experiencing religious persecution at the hands of Spain's Catholics were welcomed into the Ottoman Empire where they were given much more religious freedom than anywhere else in the world at that time.

With the millet system, different nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, and religions were allowed to thrive. People commonly think of the Ottoman Empire as a "Turkish" empire. This is far from the truth. While the sultans from the beginning to the end were Turkish, the general populace was a wide variety of peoples. People within the millets were able to rise up in society to prominent positions. In fact, many of the sultan's viziers (ministers) came from Greek, Bosnian, Arab, or Persian backgrounds.

### European Nationalism

In 1789, a revolution began in France that would alter world history. The French Empire, headed by a tyrannical king was shaken to its core. The revolution helped bring Enlightenment ideas to the forefront in Europe, such as natural rights, government by the people, and social contract theory. However, besides the political effects of the revolution, a much more important social one was taking form: nationalism.

In Europe, the concept of nationalism took the form of people being led by ethnically similar people. The large multi-national empires of the past, such as the Holy Roman Empire or the Spanish Empire were seen as inherently weak because of the numerous nationalities and languages within the empire. Ethnic/linguistic groups began to revolt. The goal of many of these groups was to be led by someone who has the same ethnicity and language as them. Thus for example, the Dutch of Holland rejected Spanish rule, as did the Italians in Sicily. Revolutions broke out across the European continent, based on the idea of establishing nation-states: countries that only have one nationality within them, and are ruled by someone of that nationality.

This rising tide of nationalism made its way into the Ottoman Empire as well. Although the millet system gave people their rights and allowed them to rule themselves, European nationalism dictated that the ethnic minorities of the Ottoman Empire should not have a Turkish sultan. **Nationalism meant that they had to break free of the Ottoman Empire and be led by their own people.**

Such an idea did not just arise on its own within the Ottoman Empire. As previously stated, the millet system provided a framework for different nationalities to have rights and freedom within the Ottoman realm. With this type of contentment, average people were unlikely to rise up against their Ottoman governors. To provide the backbone for such revolutions, the major European powers of the day – Britain, France, and Russia – stepped in.

## Revolts Against the Ottoman Government

European powers actively encouraged nationalities within the Ottoman empire to revolt throughout the 1800s. For example, the Greek revolution of 1821-1832 was strongly encouraged by other European powers, who sought to undermine and weaken the Ottomans. Not all Greeks were in favor of independence, in fact the Orthodox Patriarch, who was chosen by the Greeks in accordance with the millet system openly denounced the rebels in favor of unity with the Ottomans. However, the Greek revolutionaries were heavily aided by the British, who sent their navy (along with the Russians and the French) to battle the Ottomans on behalf of the Greeks. With the political and economic strains that the Ottomans were already facing at that time, they were unable to defeat this intervention by Europe and Greece was proclaimed independent of the Ottoman Empire.

With the successful nationalistic revolt of the Greeks, other minorities within the empire were encouraged to revolt. The Tanzimat reforms that were discussed in post 2 also helped to strengthen nationalist revolts. The Tanzimat encouraged all people within the Ottoman Empire to submit to a single code of laws, instead of allowing them the right to live according to their own ethnic/religious rules. Thus, more revolts ensued. The Serbians continued armed revolt against the Ottomans throughout the 1800s, and were strongly supported by the Russians. Armenians throughout Anatolia also revolted and were also supported by the Russians. Even fellow Muslims, the Bosniaks began to fight for independence, both because of nationalistic ideas and as protest against the un-Islamic reforms in the Tanzimat.

## Turkish Nationalism

Perhaps the most bewildering forms of nationalism during the decline of the Ottoman Empire was the nationalistic ideas of the Turks and Arabs. Since 1517, the Turks and Arabs had been intimately linked within the Ottoman Empire. Their cultures and histories mixed, explaining the huge amount of loan words from each other in both languages today. Both had a very large role within the Ottoman Empire, and should have had every reason to see it succeed. However, the rising tide of European nationalism affected them as well.

In response to the revolts of the Greeks, Armenians, Serbians, and others, the Turkish leaders in the Ottoman Empire needed to find a way to counter the effects of such revolutions. While Sultan Abdülhamid II's solution was pan-Islamic solidarity and an "Ottoman" identity instead of a nationalist identity in the empire, many others began to think of the Ottoman Empire as a purely Turkish state. They promoted the ideas that Turkish pride should be emphasized in the same way nationalist pride was prevalent throughout Europe. Turks began to promote themselves throughout government, and exclude others. This policy was promoted by the same group (the Young Turks) that promoted secularism and a movement away from Islam throughout the 1800s.

## World War One and Arab Nationalism

As a reaction to the rise of Turkish nationalism, some Arab thinkers and political leaders began to formulate ideas of Arab nationalism. They looked back at the Abbasid and Umayyad days



when Arabs were the leaders of the Muslim empire and hoped to create something similar. In their view, the Ottoman Turks had hampered the progress of the Arab world and held them back.

By the time World War One began in the summer of 1914, the Ottoman Empire was nothing but a shell of its former self. Its former lands in Europe were now gone as the Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs, and Bosnians were all either independent or under European control. All that was left was the predominantly Turkish lands of Anatolia and the Arab lands south of it, including present-day Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia.



Soldiers of the Arab Revolt. The (British designed) flag of the Arab Revolt went on to be the basis of modern nationalistic flags of many Arab countries.

In WWI, the Ottomans sided with the Germans and Austrians against Russia, France, and Britain. Due to Turkish nationalism, the army was almost entirely made up of Turks, with Arabs excluded. Because of this, the British saw an opportunity to further break apart the Ottoman state. The British offered the Arab governor of Makkah, Sherif Hussain, his own Arab kingdom if he sided with them and revolted against the Ottomans. The British sent the later (in)famous T.E. Lawrence (aka, Lawrence of Arabia) to Hussain to convince him to revolt, and provide him with huge amounts of money and weapons.

With British encouragement, a group of Arabs from the Hejaz (Western Arabian Peninsula, including Makkah and Madinah), revolted against their brothers in Islam and sided with the British. From 1914 to 1918, the Arabs harassed the Ottoman forces throughout the Arab world. Because of the Arab Revolt, the British were able to easily conquer Iraq, Palestine, and Syria from the Ottoman Empire. For the first time since 1187, the holy city of Jerusalem was under the control of Christian Europe, this time because of the help given to them by nationalistic Arabs.

### **Final Destruction of the Ottoman Empire**

World War One did not go with for the Ottomans. Invaded by European powers and revolted against by the Arabs, the Ottoman Empire essentially ceased to exist by the time the war was over in 1918. An ultra-nationalist Turkish leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, took power in what was now known as Turkey, and declared it a purely Turkish state. Other nationalities were not

welcomed in this new nation. In fact, huge population transfers occurred between Greece and Turkey, with each expelling the other ethnic group from within its borders.



The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 divided up the Ottoman Empire among the British and the French.

In the Arab world, the British (of course) did not keep their promise to Sherif Hussain. They had simultaneously decided to divide up the Arab world between Britain and France. Arbitrary lines were drawn on the map to divide up the Arab world into new states called Transjordan, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine. Zionist Jews were encouraged to settle in Palestine, creating a new Jewish state – Israel. Egypt continued under British domination to become its own nation, separate from the rest of the Arab world. What had once been the great Ottoman Empire was no more, it was replaced by numerous competing and disunited nationalistic states.

## Conclusions

Like all empires throughout Islamic history and world history in general, the Ottomans did not last forever. They were the last great Muslim empire, finally ending just one generation ago. The reasons for their decline are many. Political corruption weakened them in the face of Europe's rising power. Economically, many factors (both within and outside of Ottoman control) helped bring poverty and despair to the empire that was once the economic powerhouse of Europe. The Islamic character of the empire was lost. And finally, the European idea of nationalism dealt the empire its death-blow. The purpose of this series is not to languish on past failures and mistakes. It is to educate people, Muslim and non, to understand the mistakes of the past to help prevent the same mistakes in the future.



## PART2:

### How the British Divided Up the Arab World

Dec. 26

The development of the modern nation states throughout the Arab world is a fascinating and heartbreaking process. 100 years ago, most Arabs were part of the Ottoman Empire/Caliphate, a large multi-ethnic state based in Istanbul. Today, a political map of the Arab world looks like a very complex jigsaw puzzle. A complex and intricate course of events in the 1910s brought about the end of the Ottomans and the rise of these new nations with borders running across the Middle East, dividing Muslims from each other. While there are many different factors leading to this, the role that the British played in this was far greater than any other player in the region. Three separate agreements made conflicting promises that the British had to stand by. The result was a political mess that divided up a large part of the Muslim world.

### The Outbreak of World War I

In the summer of 1914, war broke out in Europe. A complex system of alliances, a militaristic arms race, colonial ambitions, and general mismanagement at the highest government levels led to this devastating war that would claim the lives of 12 million people from 1914 to 1918. On the “Allied” side stood the empires of Britain, France, and Russia. The “Central” powers consisted of Germany and Austria-Hungary.



The Ottoman Empire in 1914 at the start of the war

At first, the Ottoman Empire decided to remain neutral. They were not nearly as strong as any of the other nations fighting in the war, and were wracked by internal and external threats. The Ottoman sultan/caliph was nothing more than a figurehead at this point, with the last powerful sultan, Abdulhamid II, having been overthrown in 1908 and replaced with a military government led by the “Three Pashas”. They were from the secular Westernized group, the Young Turks.

Financially, the Ottomans were in a serious bind, owing huge debts to the European powers that they were not able to pay. After trying to join the Allied side and being rejected, the Ottomans sided with the Central Powers in October of 1914.

The British immediately began to conceive of plans to dissolve the Ottoman Empire and expand their Middle Eastern empire. They had already had control of Egypt since 1888 and India since 1857. The Ottoman Middle East lay right in the middle of these two important colonies, and the British were determined to exterminate it as part of the world war.

### **The Arab Revolt**

One of the British strategies was to turn the Ottoman Empire's Arab subjects against the government. They found a ready and willing helper in the Hejaz, the western region of the Arabian Peninsula. Sharif Hussein bin Ali, the amir (governor) of Makkah entered into an agreement with the British government to revolt against the Ottomans. His reasons for allying with the foreign British against other Muslims remains uncertain. Possible reasons for his revolt were: disapproval with the Turkish nationalist objectives of the Three Pashas, a personal feud with the Ottoman government, or simply a desire for his own kingdom.

Whatever his reasons were, Sharif Hussein decided to revolt against the Ottoman government in alliance with the British. In return, the British promised to provide money and weapons to the rebels to help them fight the much more organized Ottoman army. Also, the British promised him that after the war, he would be given his own Arab kingdom that would cover the entire Arabian Peninsula, including Syria and Iraq. The letters in which the two sides negotiated and discussed revolt were known as the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence, as Sharif Hussein was communicating with the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon.



Arab rebels with the British-designed Flag of the Arab Revolt

In June of 1916 Sharif Hussein led his group of armed Bedouin warriors from the Hejaz in an armed campaign against the Ottomans. Within a few months, the Arab rebels managed to capture numerous cities in the Hejaz (including Jeddah and Makkah) with help from the British army and navy. The British provided support in the form of soldiers, weapons, money, advisors (including the “legendary” Lawrence of Arabia), and a flag. The British in Egypt drew up a flag for the Arabs to use in battle, which was known as the “Flag of the Arab Revolt”. This flag

would later become the model for other Arab flags of countries such as Jordan, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, and Kuwait.

As World War One progressed through 1917 and 1918, the Arab rebels managed to capture many major cities from the Ottomans. As the British advanced into Palestine and Iraq, capturing cities such as Jerusalem and Baghdad, the Arabs aided them by capturing Amman and Damascus. It is important to note that the Arab Revolt did not have the backing of a large majority of the Arab population. It was a minority movement led by a few leaders who sought to increase their own powers. The vast majority of the Arab people stayed away from the conflict and did not support the rebels or the Ottoman government. Sharif Hussein's plan to create his own Arab kingdom was succeeding so far, if it were not for other promises the British would make.

### The Sykes-Picot Agreement



British and French control according to the Sykes-Picot Agreement

Before the Arab Revolt could even begin and before Sharif Hussein could create his Arab kingdom, the British and French had other plans. In the winter of 1915-1916, two diplomats, Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and François Georges-Picot of France secretly met to decide the fate of the post-Ottoman Arab world.

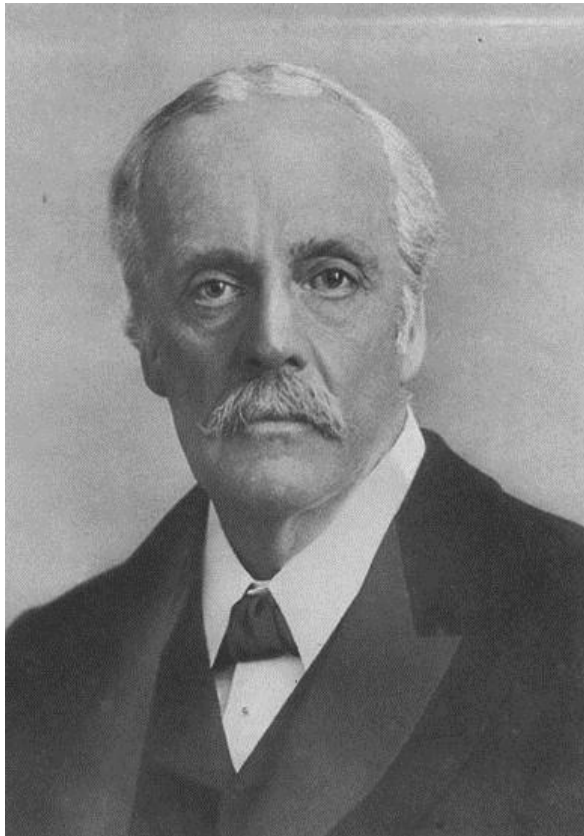
According to what would become known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the British and French agreed to divide up the Arab world between themselves. The British were to take control of what is now Iraq, Kuwait, and Jordan. The French were given modern Syria, Lebanon, and southern Turkey. The status of Palestine was to be determined later, with Zionist ambitions to be taken into account. The zones of control that the British and French were given allowed for some amount of Arab self-rule in some areas, albeit with European control over such Arab kingdoms. In other areas, the British and French were promised total control.

Although it was meant to be a secret agreement for a post-WWI Middle East, the agreement became known publicly in 1917 when the Russian Bolshevik government exposed it. The Sykes-Picot Agreement directly contradicted the promises the British made to Sherif Hussein and

caused a considerable amount of tension between the British and Arabs. However, this would not be the last of the conflicting agreements the British would make.

### The Balfour Declaration

Another group that wanted a say in the political landscape of the Middle East were the Zionists. Zionism is a political movement that calls for the establishment of a Jewish state in the Holy Land of Palestine. It began in the 1800s as a movement that sought to find a homeland away from Europe for Jews (most of which lived in Germany, Poland, and Russia).



Foreign Office,  
November 2nd, 1917.

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet

"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.



Arthur Balfour and the original Balfour Declaration

Eventually the Zionists decided to pressure the British government during WWI into allowing them to settle in Palestine after the war was over. Within the British government, there were many who were sympathetic to this political movement. One of those was Arthur Balfour, the Foreign Secretary for Britain. On November 2nd, 1917, he sent a letter to Baron Rothschild, a leader in the Zionist community. The letter declared the British government's official support for the Zionist movement's goals to establish a Jewish state in Palestine:

*"His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."*

### Three Conflicting Agreements

By 1917, the British had made three different agreements with three different groups promising three different political futures for the Arab world. The Arabs insisted they still get their Arab kingdom that was promised to them through Sharif Hussein. The French (and British themselves) expected to divide up that same land among themselves. And the Zionists expected to be given Palestine as promised by Balfour.

In 1918 the war ended with the victory of the Allies and the complete destruction of the Ottoman Empire. Although the Ottomans existed in name until 1922 (and the caliphate existed in name until 1924), all the former Ottoman land was now under European occupation. The war was over, but the Middle East's future was still in dispute between three different sides.



The mandates that the League of Nations created after WWI

Which side won? None fully got what they wanted. In the aftermath of WWI, the League of Nations (a forerunner to the United Nations) was established. One of its jobs was to divide up the conquered Ottoman lands. It drew up “mandates” for the Arab world. Each mandate was supposed to be ruled by the British or French “until such time as they are able to stand alone.” The League was the one to draw up the borders we see on modern political maps of the Middle East. The borders were drawn without regard for the wishes of the people living there, or along ethnic, geographic, or religious boundaries – they were truly arbitrary. It is important to note that even today, political borders in the Middle East do not indicate different groups of people. **The differences between Iraqis, Syrians, Jordanians, etc. were entirely created by the European colonizers as a method of dividing the Arabs against each other.**

Through the mandate system, the British and the French were able to get the control they wanted over the Middle East. For Sharif Hussein, his sons were allowed to rule over these mandates under British “protection”. Prince Faisal was made king of Iraq and Syria and Prince Abdullah was made king of Jordan. In practice, however, the British and French had real authority over these areas.

For the Zionists, they were allowed by the British government to settle in Palestine, although with limitations. The British did not want to anger the Arabs already living in Palestine, so they tried to limit the number of Jews allowed to migrate to Palestine. This angered the Zionists, who looked for illegal ways to immigrate throughout the 1920s-1940s, as well as the Arabs, who saw the immigration as encroachment on land that had been theirs since Salah al-Din liberated it in 1187.

The political mess that Britain created in the aftermath of WWI remains today. The competing agreements and the subsequent countries that were created to disunite Muslims from each other led to political instability throughout the Middle East. The rise of Zionism coupled with the disunity of the Muslims in that region has led to corrupt governments and economic decline for the Middle East as a whole. The divisions that the British instituted in the Muslim world remain strong today, despite being wholly created within the past 100 years.



## PART3:

### The Arab Revolt of World War One

Aug. 04

No war has had as big an impact on the modern Middle East as the First World War, which lasted from 1914-1918. The war signaled the end of the Ottoman Empire, a major world power since the fifteenth century, and the final victory of Western European imperialism. In the aftermath of the war, almost the entire Muslim world was occupied by foreign forces, something that had never happened before, not during the Crusades, the Mongol invasion, or the Spanish Reconquista. One of the most important (and most debated) aspects of WWI was the revolt of the Arabs against the Ottoman Empire. Was this revolt a manifestation of overwhelming Arab resistance to the Turkish Ottoman Empire, or just a small band of warriors who did not represent Arab sentiment at large?

### Political and Intellectual Background

The Ottoman Empire had ruled much of the Arab world since Sultan Yavuz Selim conquered the Mamluk Empire in the 1510s. Syria, Iraq, and Egypt had been core provinces of the Ottoman State for centuries, but Ottoman control also extended to distant Arab regions in the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa.



The Ottoman Empire at its peak in the 16th century

At its core, the Ottoman Empire was a multi-ethnic state. The ruling family was Turkish, but the population was made up of Turks, Kurds, Greeks, Armenians, Bosnians, Serbians, Persians, Arabs, and others. And for the most part, this multi-ethnic empire did not suffer from its diversity. In the 1800s, however, a wave of European nationalism began to hit the Ottoman realm. In 1832, the Greeks (with strong British support) managed to gain independence from the Ottomans. The Serbs attempted to follow, supported by Russian arms and money.

Nationalistic feeling also spread to the Turks themselves. Many young Turkish students studied in European cities such as Paris and London in the 1800s, and adopted European ideas of nationalism, which conflicted with the multi-ethnic nature of the Ottoman Empire. Turkish



nationalism was slowed somewhat by the reign of Sultan/Caliph Abdülhamid II, who reigned from 1876 to 1908. He emphasized pan-Islamism and the unity of the empire's subjects based on their religious affiliation, not their ethnic identities.

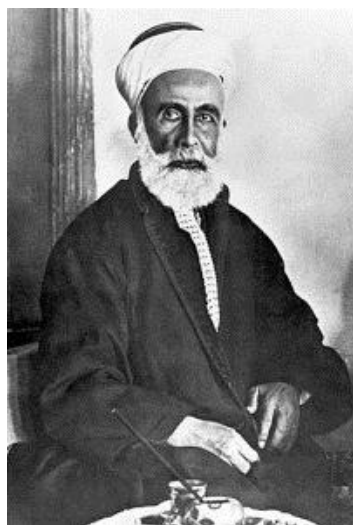
But even Abdülhamid's authoritarian rule could not turn back the rising tide of nationalist thought. A group of Western-educated Ottoman army officers, known as the Committee of Union and Progress, or the Young Turks, overthrew Abdülhamid in 1908. The Young Turks took control of Ottoman government and began a process of Turkifying the empire, at the cost of marginalizing the empire's other groups.

Meanwhile, the empire's Arab regions were not immune from nationalism either. Major Arab cities such as Damascus, Beirut, and Cairo became hubs of Western thought, where the concept of Arab nationalism began to take form. It was especially aided by American missionaries, who were unable to convert local Muslims to Protestantism, but succeeded in establishing numerous educational institutes that imbued a sense of national identity among Arab students.

It is important to note, however, that while nationalist thought was beginning to take hold among Western-educated Turks and Arabs, it was hardly a mainstream ideology. Most Arabs and Turks were content to be a part of a multi-ethnic empire. Some simply demanded more autonomy for ethnic groups within the Ottoman State. A wide range of nationalist beliefs existed, but it is safe to say that those advocating for a complete break from Ottoman history and the establishment of ethnic nation-states were a small minority.

### **Sharif Hussein and the British**

The European powers, however, believed it was only a matter of time before ethnic tensions would erupt into fully-fledged independence movements. Thus, when World War One began in the summer of 1914 and the Ottoman Empire found itself opposed to Britain, France, and Russia, the British figured they could use what they believed to be popular Arab sentiment for independence to their advantage. They believed that supporting a popular Arab uprising against the Ottomans would significantly help their war efforts in the Middle East.



## Sharif Hussein of Hejaz

The British did not have to look hard for an Arab man willing to lead this supposed Arab uprising. The disgruntled local emir (governor) of Mecca, Sharif Hussein, was a prime candidate. He was nominally appointed by the Ottoman sultan to his post, but had fears that they would soon replace him. He also had dreams of becoming an independent ruler of Hejaz (the west of the Arabian Peninsula), and perhaps even king of all the Arabs.

Due to Sharif Hussein's descent from Banu Hashim (the same tribe as the Prophet Muhammad) and his willingness to revolt against the Ottomans, the British believed that he could rally the millions of Arabs of the Ottoman Empire to arms against their Turkish overlords. In a series of letters from late 1915 to early 1916, the British enticed the Hashemite emir to rebel, and promised to supply him with money, weapons, ships, and men, believing that this would snowball into a large-scale Arab revolt. Sharif Hussein and his son Feisal encouraged such British thinking, and even bragged to British agents that they would be able to get 100,000 to 250,000 Arab soldiers in the Ottoman Army to defect.

### The Arabs Revolt...Or Did They?

Sharif Hussein declared his rebellion against the Ottoman Empire in early June of 1916. Word was sent out (with British help, of course) to Arabs throughout the empire to join Sharif Hussein as he built a new Arab kingdom, free from Ottoman domination. The response was lackluster, to say the least. Besides a few thousand desert warriors from Sharif Hussein's own tribe, **absolutely no Arabs flocked to Sharif Hussein's side.** In fact, the only non-Hejazi soldiers that took part in the Arab Revolt were Arab prisoners of war captured by the British and enticed to switch sides.

Further disappointing the British, Sharif Hussein did not seem to be interested in Arab nationalism at all. His only motivation seems to have been to create a kingdom that he would personally be the ruler of. The resurgence of Arab identity, literature, and culture did not interest him nearly as much as personal power. The British were not looking to create a powerful, independent monarchy. They wanted a mild form of Arab nationalism they could control as another part of their empire. But support for such an idea did not exist, contrary to their pre-war calculations.

But despite getting almost no support from the general Arab population, Sharif Hussein's revolt was not unsuccessful. With British technology, money, and naval power, he was able to gain control of the Hejaz fairly quickly, with the exception of Medina, where the Ottoman commander Fakhri Pasha held the city of the Prophet ﷺ for the Ottoman Empire until 1919, well after the war ended. Thus, Ottoman army units were tied down in the Hejaz, instead of protecting other fronts in Palestine and Iraq, which were under attack by the British.



Arab rebels with the British-designed Flag of the Arab Revolt

It is important to note that the British were also in contact with the Hashemites' arch rivals, the Saudis, who controlled the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. The Saudis had revolted against the Ottomans before, notably in the early 1800s, but the British aimed simply to keep them neutral, to prevent them from hampering the revolt of Sharif Hussein. The Saudi role in WWI was minor, and attempts to attribute the entire fall of the Ottoman Empire to a Saudi revolt are based in no more than conjecture and conspiracy.

As the war drag on, British support for the Hashemite revolt continued to grow, especially as Sharif Hussein showed his inability to lead a major rebellion. His small group of tribesmen had no artillery or machine guns, which had to be provided and manned by British soldiers, usually from Egypt and India. Also instrumental was the role played by a young British army officer, who would later be famously known as Lawrence of Arabia. It is doubtful that without such British support, Sharif Hussein's effort would have even survived the first few months after the revolt was declared.

As the British army made its way up the Palestinian coast in 1917, the Arab rebels helped by harassing Ottoman supply chains leading to the front lines. By December of 1917, the British captured Jerusalem as Ottoman resistance collapsed. The British and their Arab allies continued to advance as the war died down, capturing the ancient cities of Damascus and Aleppo in October of 1918. By then, almost all of the Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire had been conquered and subjected to British authority. At this point, the promises the British made to Sharif Hussein regarding a united Arab kingdom began to be a big issue.

### Aftermath and Conclusions

In exchange for his rebellion against the Ottomans, Sharif Hussein expected to be given control of the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, and Iraq by the British. But in keeping with British imperial traditions, their promises did not mean much. The Arab lands were partitioned after the war by the new League of Nations. Britain already had control of Egypt since the 1800s, but was now also given mandates over Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq, while the France got mandates over Syria and Lebanon.



The mandates that the League of Nations created after WWI

Sharif Hussein's son Feisal was crowned king of Syria in 1920 but was quickly overthrown by the French when he sought to establish true authority, independent from Europe. The next year, Britain installed him as king of Iraq, despite the fact that very few people in Iraq even knew who he was. Feisal and his descendants ruled Iraq with strong British support until they were deposed in 1958 by members of the Iraqi military.

Meanwhile, in the Hejaz where the revolt started, Sharif Hussein was still trying to establish himself as a powerful monarch. He declared himself caliph after Atatürk abolished the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, but just like his revolt a decade earlier, no one took Hussein's pretensions seriously outside of his own tribe. He died in late 1924 and was succeeded by his eldest son Ali, but Hashemite control over Hejaz was coming to an end. In 1925, the Saudis conquered Hejaz and established the modern state of Saudi Arabia. The only place where Hashemite control lasted was in Jordan, where Sharif Hussein's descendant, King Abdullah, still rules over the country today.

In conclusion, while the Arab Revolt was no doubt a major event in modern Middle Eastern history, it was not as impactful as many make it out to be. It was far from a general Arab rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, and the ultimate fall of the Ottoman Empire had more to do with British military ability, and the centuries-long decline of Ottoman power. Simultaneously, the politicians in charge of the Ottoman Empire at the time certainly created an atmosphere where revolts against the Turkish-dominated government were to be expected. Political and ethnic identities today drive much of the rhetoric regarding the Revolt, yet it may be better to view it simply as a minor historical event in the greater decline of the Ottoman Empire and rise of European imperialism instead of a bone of contention between Arab and Turkish Muslims.

## PART4:

### How Atatürk Made Turkey Secular

Jun. 11

The evolution of Turkey in the early 1900s is one of the most baffling cultural and social changes in Islamic history. In a few short years, the Ottoman Empire was brought down from within, stripped of its Islamic history, and devolved into a new secular nation known as Turkey. The consequences of this change are still being felt today throughout the Muslim world, and especially in a very polarized and ideologically segmented Turkey.

What caused this monumental change in Turkish government and society? At the center of it all is Mustafa Kemal, better known as Atatürk. Through his leadership in the 1920s and 1930s, modern secular Turkey was born, and Islam took a backseat in Turkish society.

### The Rise of Atatürk

The decision of the Ottoman Empire to enter the First World War in 1914 turned out to be a horrible mistake. The empire was run by a dictatorship led by the “Three Pashas” who unilaterally entered the war on the German side, against the British, French, and Russians. The Ottoman Empire was invaded from the south by the [British](#), from the East by the Russians, and by the Greeks in the West. By 1918 when the war ended, the empire was divided and occupied by the victorious allies, leaving only the central Anatolian highlands under native Turkish control.



Mustafa Kemal in 1918

It was in central Anatolia where Mustafa Kemal would rise to become a national hero for the Turks. As an Ottoman army officer, he displayed great leadership in battle, especially at Gallipoli, where the Ottomans managed to turn back a British invasion aimed at the capital, Istanbul. After the war, however, Kemal made clear what his priorities were. His main goal was the

establishment of Turkish nationalism as the unifying force of the Turkish people. Unlike the multi-ethnic and diverse Ottoman Empire, Kemal aimed to create a monolithic state based on Turkish identity.

In Mustafa Kemal's own words, he describes the importance of Turkish identity and the insignificance of Islam as he sees it:

*“Even before accepting the religion of the Arabs [Islam], the Turks were a great nation. After accepting the religion of the Arabs, this religion, didn't effect to combine the Arabs, the Persians and Egyptians with the Turks to constitute a nation. (This religion) rather, loosened the national nexus of Turkish nation, got national excitement numb. This was very natural. Because the purpose of the religion founded by Muhammad, over all nations, was to drag to an including Arab national politics.”*

- *Mustafa Kemal*, Medenî Bilgiler

Mustafa Kemal's skewed [and quite frankly, factually incorrect] views of Islamic history helped push his nationalist agenda. Using Turkish identity as a rallying point, he managed to unite former Ottoman officers under his command in the Turkish War of Independence in the early 1920s and expel the occupying forces of the Greeks, British, and French, who had encroached on Turkish land after WWI. By 1922, Kemal managed to completely free the Turks of foreign occupation and used the opportunity to establish the modern Republic of Turkey, led by the Grand National Assembly, the GNA, in Ankara. At the head of the new Turkish government was a president, elected by the GNA. The natural choice was Mustafa Kemal, the hero of the War of Independence, who now took on the title of “Atatürk”, meaning “Father of the Turks”.

### **Abolition of the Ottoman Sultanate and the Caliphate**

At first, the new Turkish government seemed to inherit the role of the Ottoman government as the upholder of Islam. A new constitution drawn up by the GNA declared that Islam was the official state religion of Turkey and that all laws had to be vetted by a panel of Islamic law experts, to make sure they do not contradict the Shari'ah.

This new system of government could not work, however, so long as there continued to be a rival government in Istanbul, led by the Ottoman sultan. The Ankara and Istanbul governments both claimed sovereignty over Turkey, and had frankly conflicting goals. Atatürk eliminated this problem on November 1, 1922, when he abolished the Ottoman sultanate, which had existed since 1299, and officially transferred its power to the GNA. He did not immediately abolish the caliphate, however. Although the sultanate was no more, he allowed the Ottoman caliphate to continue to exist, although with no official powers, only as a symbolic figurehead.





Abdülmecid II, the last caliph who held the office from 1922 to 1924.

Knowing that this move would be very unpopular among the Turkish people, Atatürk justified it by claiming he was simply going back to a traditional Islamic form of government. From the 900s to the 1500s, the Abbasid caliphs were mostly figureheads, with real power being in the hands of viziers or warlords. Atatürk used this example to justify his creation of a powerless caliphate.

The caliphate had existed since the days following the death of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, when Abu Bakr was elected as the first leader of the Muslim world. For Muslims outside of Turkey, Atatürk's actions clearly put the office of the caliphate itself in danger. In India especially, Muslims expressed outrage at Atatürk's actions and organized the Khilafat Movement, which sought to protect the caliphate from danger, whether by foreign invaders or the Turkish government itself.

For Atatürk, the expressions of support for the caliphate from Muslims outside Turkey were seen as interference in internal Turkish affairs. Citing this supposed international interference, on March 3rd, 1924, Atatürk and the Grand National Assembly abolished the caliphate itself and sent all remaining members of the Ottoman family into exile.

### Attacks on Islam

With the caliphate out of the way, the Turkish government had more freedom to pursue policies that attacked Islamic institutions. Under the guise of “cleansing Islam of political interference”, the educational system was completely overhauled. Islamic education was banned in favor of secular, non-dogmatic schools. Other aspects of religious infrastructure were also torn down. The Shari’ah council to approve laws that the GNA had established just two years earlier was abolished. Religious endowments were seized and put under government control. Sufi lodges were forcefully shut down. All judges of Islamic law in the country were immediately fired, as all Shari’ah courts were closed.

Atatürk's attacks on Islam were not limited to the government, however. Everyday life for Turks was also dictated by Atatürk's secular ideas:



- Traditional Islamic forms of headdress such as turbans and the fez were outlawed in favor of Western-style hats.
- The hijab for women was ridiculed as a “ridiculous object” and banned in public buildings.
- The calendar was officially changed, from the traditional Islamic calendar, based on the hijrah – Prophet Muhammad ﷺ’s flight to Madinah – to the Gregorian calendar, based on the birth of Jesus Christ.
- In 1932, the adhan – the Muslim call to prayer – was outlawed in Arabic. Instead, it was rewritten using Turkish words and forced upon the country’s thousands of mosques.
- Friday was no longer considered part of the weekend. Instead, Turkey was forced to follow European norms of Saturday and Sunday being days off from work.

After all of these changes, the GNA gave up the charade in 1928 and deleted the clause in the constitution that declared Islam as the official state religion. Islam had been replaced with Atatürk’s secular ideologies.

### Language Reform

Atatürk knew these secular reforms would be futile if the Turkish people could manage to rally together to oppose them. The biggest danger to this new order was the history of the Turks, which since the 900s had been intertwined with Islam. In order to distance the new generations of Turks from their past, Atatürk had to make the past unreadable to them.



Atatürk introducing the new Latin script in 1928.

With the excuse of increasing literacy among Turks (which was indeed very low in the 1920s), Atatürk advocated the replacement of Arabic letters with Latin letters. Much like Persian, Turkish was written in Arabic letters for hundreds of years after the conversion of the Turks to Islam in the 900s. Because Turkish was written in the Arabic script, Turks could read the Qur’an, and other Islamic texts with relative ease, connecting them to an Islamic identity – which Atatürk saw as a threat.

In addition to the introduction of the Latin letters, Atatürk created a commission charged with the replacement of Arabic and Persian loanwords in Turkish. In keeping with his nationalist agenda, Atatürk wanted a language that was purely Turkish, which meant old Turkish words, that had become obsolete during the Ottoman era, came back into use instead of Arabic words. For example, the Turkish War of Independence, formerly known as the *İstiklal Harbi*, is now known as *Kurtuluş Savaşı*, because “istiklal” and “harb” are Arabic loanwords in Turkish.

From Atatürk’s perspective, the language reform was wildly successful. Within a few decades, the old Ottoman Turkish was effectively extinct. The newer generations of Turks were completely cut off from the older generations, with whom simple conversations were difficult. With the Turkish people illiterate to their past, the Turkish government was able to feed them a version of history that they deemed acceptable, one that promoted the Turkish nationalistic ideas of Atatürk himself.

### Secular Turkey

All of these reforms worked together to effectively erase Islam from the lives of the everyday Turks. Despite the best efforts of religious-minded Turks (such as Said Nursi) to preserve their heritage, language, and religion, the government’s pressure to adopt secular ideas was too much. For over 80 years, Turkish government remained vehemently secular. Attempts to bring back Islamic values into government have been met with resistance by the military, which views itself as the protector of Atatürk’s secularism.

In 1950, Adnan Menderes was democratically elected prime minister of Turkey on a platform of bringing back the Arabic adhan. Although he was successful, he was overthrown by a military coup in 1960 and executed after a hasty trial. More recently, in 1996, Necmettin Erbakan was elected prime minister, while remarkably openly declaring himself an “Islamist”. Once again, the military stepped in, and overthrew him from power after just one year in office.

Modern Turkey’s relations with Islam and its own history are complicated. Portions of the society strongly support Atatürk’s ideology and believe Islam should have no role in public life. Other segments of society envision a return to a more Islam-oriented society and government, and closer relations with the rest of the Muslim world. Most troubling, however, is that the ideological conflict between these two opposing sides shows no signs of subsiding anytime soon.